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Cultivation of positive cultural values and practices: A blueprint for African development

Opafola S. Olayinka

Philosophy Department, Faculty of Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, P. M. B. 2002, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria. E-mail: yinka.opafola@gmail.com or opafolay2k@yahoo.com. Tel: 08026942539; 08034731708; 08058871073.

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This paper investigates the influence of culture on development within the context of cultural values and practices in African societies. It limits its searchlight to the communal stage of African development. It operates on the assumption that a dialectical relationship exists between the past, the present and the future. It supposes that a faithful consideration of the merits and demerits of past events can serve as a compass for the navigation of present and future events. The paper tries to provide answers to the following questions, among others: Why is it necessary to hold and promote positive cultural values and practices? What are the causes and consequences of frustrations, tensions and conflicts, among other developmental problems prevalent in Africa? What are the solutions to the problems? The paper recommends some solutions. It then submits that the cultivation and sustenance of positive cultural values and practices can promote African positive development.

Key words: Culture, values, practices, Africa, development, blueprint.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is expository, analytical and evaluative. It recognizes the creative, material, institutional and philosophical aspects of culture. However, it is mainly concerned with the philosophical aspect. In this regard, it will consider few cultural values and practices. The paper identifies the basis of and distinguishes between, positive and negative cultural values and practices. It also highlights certain developmental issues. It then discusses the cultivation of positive cultural values and practices as a blueprint for the promotion of African development. The paper takes the differences that may be deemed to exist between the terms "societies", "communities" and "countries" for granted. It regards them as synonymous and uses them interchangeably. The paper has six sections. The introductory section precedes the second section, which considers aspects of culture. The third section deals with moral principles, cultural values and practices. The fourth section enumerates some developmental issues. The fifth section is concerned with the cultivation of positive cultural values and practices as a blueprint for African development. The sixth section

covers conclusion.

ASPECTS OF CULTURE

Culture is the "totality of the way of life (material, intellectual and spiritual) evolved by (a society or) a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment (Obasanjo and Mabogunje, 1991: 197) (Rodney, 1972: 41) (Fanon, 1983: 196) (Raymond, 1961: 16; 1972: 273). Culture also constitutes "an imprecise way of describing the social realities in any given society (Ayisi, 1979: 3-4). Culture has creative, material, institutional and philosophical aspects (Obasanjo and Mabogunje, 1991: 197). The creative aspect is concerned with a people's innovativeness in literature (oral or written), their scientific and technological endeavors and their visual and performing arts. The material aspect has to do with artifacts in their various forms - namely, utensils, tools, food, clothing, housing, etc. The institutional aspect comprises the social, economic, poli-

tical and legal objectives. The philosophical aspect, on which emphasis is placed in this paper, deals with ideas, beliefs and values. Human beings represent a major element of culture in the senses in which they are the common denominator of other elements and are responsible for the production and use of artifacts as well as for the evolution of institutions and ideas, among others things (Momoh, 1991: 26). This paper recognizes this fact and proceeds from it. Philosophy, which is also an aspect of culture, deals with human beings, among other concerns, in certain respects. These include human beings themselves and their relationship with and knowledge of themselves, the universe, spirits, ancestors, deities, divinities, god, the civil society and the State (Momoh, 1991: 02). This paper is also interested in the relationship between a human being and fellow human beings as well as the relationship between human beings on the one hand and the civil society and the State on the other hand.

MORAL PRINCIPLES, CULTURAL VALUES AND PRACTICES

Moral principles guide cultural values and practices in the sense in which the former are guides of human conduct (Omoregbe, 1990: 156). Moral principles derive from the moral law, which directs that human beings ought to do what is good and avoid what is bad. The moral law has different aspects which different philosophical systems emphasized. The focus of Stoic ethics is self-discipline and moderation of desires for money, comfort, material possessions and pleasure. Utilitarianism is concerned with altruism. Existentialism stresses the responsibility which freedom implies. Personalistic ethics is interested in the inviolable dignity of every human person. Marxian ethics is averse to the exploitation and instrumentalization of any human being by another human being. Kantian ethics enjoins devotion to duty. African traditional ethics pays primary attention to social consciousness and kindness to other people (Omoregbe, 1990: 199). There are positive and negative cultural values and practices just as positive and negative moral principles exist. Positive moral principles prescribe the cultivation of the following virtues or positive cultural values and practices: respect for others, fidelity, respect for age and authority, love of one's neighbours, personal integrity, sense of duty, patriotism, justice, truthfulness, discipline, moderation, tolerance, brotherhood (or solidarity), cooperation, altruism, kindness, generosity, hospitality, etc. The negative moral principles prohibit such vices or negative cultural values and practices such as lack of respect for others, disloyalty or disobedience to constituted authority, laziness, lack of patriotism, lack of personal integrity, injustice, insincerity or dishonesty, individualism, selfishness, greed, cheating, false oath, bribery, stealing, embezzlement of public fund, adultery,

indiscipline, lack of moderation, intolerance, murder, suicide, among others (Omoregbe, 1990: 156).

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Development can be negative or positive. Negatively, it implies underdevelopment. Positive development is synonymous with progress. Development has quantitative and qualitative aspects. It also has many dimensions—human, social, economic, cultural and political, among others. For instance, we can talk about negative or positive human and cultural development as well as quantitative or qualitative aspects of human and cultural development. For example, positive development results when people participate in the determination of their environment choose and use their resources to the maximum capacity (Pearson, 1970: 8 - 9). On the other hand, low rate of economic growth, high rate of unemployment, mass poverty, poor standard of living and social unrest are some of the indices of underdevelopment. Definitions of development and or, underdevelopment vary depending on which dimension, type or aspect of development receives the attention of the author (s). This paper recognizes this fact. However, its scope is too limited to consider the various definitions here. We have treated them in the works cited below. Developmental issues are many. Some of them are promotion of the dignity and respect for human beings; sub-ordination of economic growth to social growth, eradication of social, political and economic inequalities, among others; eradication of mass poverty (intellectual and material), unemployment, exploitation, corruption and prostitution (among other social vices); social, economic and political insecurity. Others include promotion of respectable standard of living; human rights and freedoms; stable nuclear and extended family systems; social justice, mass mobilization and participation in political and other affairs; responsible and credible leadership as well as national and or African cohesion and progress (Opafola, 1996: 115 - 125; Opafola, 1997; Opafola, 1998: 155 - 168; Opafola, 2000: 188 - 200; Opafola, 2000: 201 - 218).

CULTIVATION OF POSITIVE CULTURAL VALUES AND PRACTICES: A BLUEPRINT FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

This paper will partly rely on the communal stage of African development as the platform for considering the challenges of cultural values and practices for African development. Communalism is a level of societal development "where property was collectively owned, work was done in common and goods were shared out equally" (Rodney, 1972: 13). African communalism does not only mean a description of traditional social structure

but also a system that contains the principles of action in the African community. Furthermore, the concept of African communalism is a domestic one in the sense in which "its principles and scope of application are limited to homogeneous communities" (Ekennia, 1998: 360). The essence of communalism consists in its humanism and its harmonization of individual progress with group welfare (Nkrumah, 1967: 88; Ekennia, 1998: 358). Initially, classes did not exist. Everybody had equal access to land and material goods were equitably distributed. However, the level of technology and production was low (Rodney, 1972: 46). Traditional African societies comprised many clans. Each clan was an aggregation of family units - nuclear and extended. Community life evolved from clan life, which developed from nuclear family life. Preceding the latter were eras of discovery of fire and its use for cooking and warmth; farming; iron working; pastoralism; house building for shelter and stable economic life. Prior to the foregoing periods, the neo-Paleolithic African engaged in digging roots, picking fruits and hunting animals (Awolowo, 1987: 10).

In the opinion of Ayittey (1992: 37), "the organizational structure of indigenous political systems was generally based on kinship and ancestry.... Custom and tradition established the procedures for government". Customarily, the elders were highly respected and were in authority. The principle of respect for age and for authority partly characterized traditional institutions or systems of government. Different levels of social control existed. Ayisi (1979: 111) identifies the following levels of social control:

1. The household level - within the household, the head, who was usually the oldest member or the father, was responsible for order and peace. He was also responsible for matters affecting each member of the household in (relation) to any person outside the household. Sanctions within this social group were informal and personal, the head having an incontrovertible last word in all matters affecting members of household.
2. The lineage level - at the lineage level, (the oldest person exercised social control) in descent line with the concurrence of representatives of the various household heads where these existed. The head represents the ancestral spirits and usually serves on the chieftom. At this level, the head was the recognized authority (but checks and balances, which were entrenched in customary rules, reflecting the wishes of the ancestors and the people over whom he held this authority, precariously hedged his authority). Sanctions were quasi-social.
3. The local level - here the chief was the recognized authority. He had judicial, political and social functions. His designation as chief meant that all the people of the town owed unflinching loyalty to him. At the time of his installment, the chief sat on the black stool, which represented his symbol. From this local level, we come to the divisional chief and paramount chief levels where

authority was vested in the chief and a number of his functionaries. The colonial administration did not abolish these traditional institutions but adopted them and in some cases made full use of them for their colonial policies.

The presence of the above-stated levels of social control in traditional African societies tends to suggest that traditional Africans recognized the need for order and discipline. On the issue of order, the authority of the paramount chiefs is reinforced by that of the divisional chief, local chief, the oldest person at the lineage level and the head of a household in descending order. Concerning the idea of discipline, it appears that those in authority were responsible enough to refrain, to some extent, from abusing their positions. In doing so, they seemed to have encouraged their subjects to be disciplined in the sense of respecting their superiors and promoting the system. In these ways, among others, the rulers and the ruled promoted political stability that was essential to economic and social progress.

Ayittey (1992: 38) recognizes the lineage or the village level as the most powerful and effective force for unity and stability in early Africa. He claims that in virtually all the African tribes, the lineage preceded two main distinct types of indigenous political organization each with further differentiation within it (Ayittey, 1992: 37). The first type consisted of tribal groupings each of which existed as a separate and independent political entity. Chiefs led some of the tribes. Such tribes were called chiefdoms while others were regarded as stateless societies. The second type of political organization comprised some conquered tribes that came under the hegemony of others as in kingdoms and empires (Ayittey, 1992: 37 - 38). Two forms of imperial rule characterized this political organization; namely, indirect rule and rule by assimilation. As Ayittey (1992: 38) puts it:

The first was an imperial rule that afforded the vassal states extensive local independence or autonomy, as in the Asante and Zande empires of the nineteenth century. This type of indirect rule was the most common. The second type of imperial rule required the vassal states to assimilate an allegedly superior foreign culture. Notable examples included the Mandinka, Fulani, Hausa, or, in general, the Islamic empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa. This was rule by assimilation.

Using the above-mentioned forms of rule, the colonizers - especially, Europeans - dominated African societies politically, economically, culturally, educationally and socially, among other ways. Colonialism has affected Africa negatively and positively. A consideration of the consequences of colonial rule is beyond the scope of this paper. We have discussed the merits and demerits of colonialism in the article titled "The Role of Colonialism in African Development" (Opafola, 2000: 188 - 200). The greatest challenge facing Africa today is how to overcome the pitfalls of foreign domination and

consolidate its gains for better results. Ayittey (1992: 38) states, "Each lineage had its head chosen according to its own rules". The criteria for the selection of each head vary. Among these are wealth, age, maturity and relation to ancestors. Wealth determined the choice of the head of the Fanti lineage of Ghana. On the contrary, age, maturity and relation to ancestors influenced the choice of the heads of most other lineages. Such lineages tended to associate old age with wisdom (Ayittey, 1992: 38). The functions of the traditional African chief included the following: First, as the political (administrative) head of the tribe, he was responsible for maintaining good order, handling public affairs and acting as the ultimate authority in all matters affecting the welfare of the state. Second, he presided over the Chief's Court, which was the final court of appeal unless there was a king, in which case his court was the final. Third, he was the religious head of the tribe, the presumed direct living representative of the ancestral spirits that guarded the tribe and whose goodwill and co-operation were considered essential to the everyday existence of the tribe. (Fourth, he had to promote the survival and integrity of his tribe) (Ayittey, 1992: 43).

Some of the values that characterized traditional African societies are respect for human dignity, respect for or deferment to age and authority, co-operation, mutual aid, altruism, hospitality, egalitarianism and political leadership as trusteeship (Meebelo, 1973: 11). Initially, the application of these values, among others, promoted human and social progress. However, some of these values eroded as traditional African societies expanded through internal evolution, trade or conquest. Indices of the advancement include money, agricultural practices, trade, industry, social stratification and consolidation of States (Rodney, 1972: 47 - 82). This expansion drastically influenced social relations. Throughout the centuries preceding the arrival of Europeans, the principles of family ties and deferment to age gradually broke down due mainly to changes in technology and in division of labour. One of the changes in technology is the introduction of iron. This facilitated the production of iron tools, which replaced wooden and stone tools. Those who could produce and obtain iron became economically and militarily strong. Use of better tools boosted food production and population. However, population growth was not commensurate with the supplies of material goods.

Changes in division of labour accompanied changes in technology. Skilled workers in leather, clothes, pottery, iron, salt making, etc. operated in close groups known as castes - especially, in respect of passing their skills on. Being privileged and strategic, the division of labour favoured them. The most privileged, in some African societies, were ironworkers who either were very close to the top of the social hierarchy or became the ruling groups. The division of labour extended to non-material spheres such as history and minstrelsy. Like other skilled

castes, professional minstrels and historians had certain special privileges and rights. One of these was the ability to criticize freely without fear of reprisal. This is not to say that every skilled caste enjoyed high status. In fact, some were in some circumstances, downgraded. This was unusual and negligible. However, it does not detract from the observation that communalism tended to witness additional stratification as time passed.

Social antagonisms and classes proceeded from social stratification. The latter was, to some extent, the logical consequence of the previous non-antagonistic differences in communal society. For example, old men could employ their control over bride price, over land allocation and over other traditional exchanges to become a privileged economic class. The elders also tried to feather their nests through secret societies some of which emerged from the areas now known as Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. Through these societies, the elders acquired power, knowledge and wealth. Though young men were disgruntled, the contradiction between them and their elders did not result in violent revolution (Rodney, 1972: 52 - 53 and 47). As Rodney (1972: 53) observed, "when disgruntled, (the young men) could either leave their communities and set up for themselves or they could challenge the principles within the society".

The process of social stratification was not limited to the fore-going aspects. Another significant aspect was that facilitated by conflict between different social formations such as pastoralists, fishermen and cultivators, to name a few. These formations related to one another as circumstances dictated. Though the relationship was often peaceful, conflicts sometimes occurred. Social classes arose when a group successfully imposed itself on others by force. The former became the dominant group and the latter, the subordinate group. A relationship of domination and subordination was thus established. The cultivators and the pastoralists often clashed. In most of East Africa and the Horn of Africa, the pastoralists gained the upper hand. They were, however, not so lucky in West Africa. The cultivators dominated them there. For example, the Fulani cattlemen were subordinated to the Hausa and Mandinga cultivators as far as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, there were clashes between agriculturalist and raiding peoples as occurred in Angola and in and around the Sahara, where the Tuaregs and Moors enslaved more peaceful and sedentary peoples and forced them to pay tributes. Consequent upon the struggles and their resolutions, the victorious and dominant group, in each case, had the opportunity to control - and indeed, held control of - the land and (where relevant) long-distance trade, mines and cattle. In addition, such group could compel its subject to serve it.

Family ties and religion constituted the basis of leadership in truly communal societies. At this initial stage, members of these societies, led by the senior ones,

shared work and received equitable share of the total product. Consequent upon the expansion of African societies, the lifestyle of the ruling groups changed. Though they contributed little to the production of wealth by fishing, farming and cattle herding, they appropriated the best and the largest of what the society offered. The ruling class and the kings especially had the right to compel their subjects to work on certain projects for some days per year. This system, known as corvee labour, facilitated greater exploitation (of man by man) and greater development of productive forces (Rodney, 1972: 54 - 55).

Generally, positive cultural values and practices promote African progress whereas the negative ones impede it. We will consider some of them. Anyone who cultivates the value of respect for others will likely acknowledge and respect human rights and freedoms. He or she will consequently promote positive development. Violation of human dignity creates tensions and conflicts as well as social and political instability. These social and political problems, among others, partly characterize authoritarian regimes. One of such governments headed by Late General Sanni Abacha existed in Nigeria between 17 November 1993 and 8 June 1998. The value of respect for age and authority is a corollary of the values of respect for others, brotherhood, co-operation, discipline and patriotism. Application of the value of respect for age and authority represents a measure of support for authority. Through such and other supports, the followers or the governed show their appreciation of the efforts of the leaders or governors, re-assure them that they are on the right track, and consequently, make them stable and focused. These and other similar measures usually promote progress. On their part, the leaders should not take the followers for granted, nor should they abuse them in any other ways. Rather, the rulers should be sensitive, responsible, responsive and accountable to the ruled. If they fail to do this, they may incur the displeasure of their subjects; especially, if there is continuous gap between expectations and achievements. The governed may be dissatisfied when their frustrations are not abated. The foregoing remarks also explain the tensions, conflicts and instability prevalent in Africa; especially, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What discipline, solidarity, co-operation, patriotism, tolerance, honesty, respect for age and authority, for instances, do will expect poor, neglected and frustrated citizens to display? Some disgruntled citizens usually exhibit general indiscipline, lack of respect for others, disobedience to constituted authority, lack of patriotism and intolerance. It seems that some African leaders have turned their back on many virtues including sincerity of purpose, honesty, personal integrity, altruism, benevolence and hospitality. Some of the vices that they have embraced are individualism, selfishness, dishonesty, greed and corruption.

We have observed that ironworkers in some traditional African societies succeeded in being close to the top of the social hierarchy and becoming ruling groups. Similarly, the military in some modern African countries enjoyed –and are still enjoying – certain privileges, one of which is ruling. Through coup d'etat, some military officers supplanted the governments of their countries and consequently changed the countries' destinies for good or ill. With the exception of Libya still being ruled by Colonel M. Gaddafi, Nigeria - under Late General Rahmat Muritala Mohammed (1975 - 1976) and General Mohammed Buhari (1984 - 1985) – Ghana (under Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings) and a few others, the military have devastated some African countries. Such countries include Gabon (under the leadership of Late Omar Bongo), Ethiopia (Mengistu Haile Mariam), Uganda (Late Idi Amin), Congo (Late Laurent Kabila), Liberia (Late Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor), Nigeria (under General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, 1985 - 1993 and Late General Sanni Abacha, 1993 - 1998) and Zimbabwe (Robert Mugabe). This devastation is also noticeable in some African countries where military heads of government/state have transformed into civilian heads through elections. Some of them are Late Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor (both of Liberia) and Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe). Apart from subverting the rule of law and militarizing their countries, the military in the above-stated and related instances have downgraded many of the cultural values and practices associated with traditional African societies. It is as if they have jettisoned the values of egalitarianism, accountability and honesty, among others. They do not seem to see anything wrong with lying, corruption, stealing, arbitrariness and authoritarianism, among other vices.

Some of the civilian governments in Africa do not seem to be better than the earlier-mentioned vicious military administrations. They are anything but democratic. This is in the sense in which they pay lip service to democratic principles. Some of these are human rights and freedoms, social justice, rule of law, equality before the law, accountability, popular participation, periodic, free and fair elections. Such regimes include Robert Mugabe's (Zimbabwe), Olusegun Obasanjo's and Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's governments (Nigeria). The more the affected military and civilian regimes play the earlier-stated negative roles, the greater the disenchantment of the citizens. Consequently, the rulers find it difficult to effectively mobilize the ruled for developmental purposes. Like sheep without a shepherd, the citizens begin to look for salvation elsewhere. Some are positive in outlook while others adopt negative posture. It is unfortunate that corruption, drug pushing, armed robbery, kidnapping, ritual killing, to mention a few, are now widespread in some African countries; especially, Nigeria.

Some of the citizens - especially, the aides - seem to be in competition with their leaders in their attempts to

realize the above-mentioned and related vices or negative values and practices. Some of the strategies usually employed are god-fatherism, lobbying, pleading and bribery. Primitive accumulation of financial and material wealth by influential persons is the offshoot of individualism. Inadequate national income, social amenities and infrastructures, high rate of illiteracy, low level of education, poor living conditions, abject and mass poverty, social and political insecurity – some of the features of an economically backward country - are some of the consequences.

Instead of addressing the above stated and other problems of development, some African leaders chase shadows. For instance, they continuously provide facilities to their Police Forces to combat crimes, which increase at alarming rate, in preference to the enthronement of good governance especially as symbolized by the provision of employment opportunities, social security schemes and enduring infrastructural facilities. A lasting solution to social vices requires serious and adequate attention to their causes - some of which are high rates of illiteracy (and low level of education), unemployment and poverty.

Conclusion

Certain cultural values and practices in modern African societies have depreciated from what they used to be in the traditional settings. The escalating rates of social, political and other vices in Africa are worrisome. Stemming the tide of this negative development and promoting African progress call for concerted efforts. Toward this end, the citizens and the leaders should eschew the earlier-stated and related vices. They should then wholeheartedly embrace the above- mentioned and related virtues or positive cultural values and practices.

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